

Isabella Furnace
West side of Bollinger Drive (LR 15151), at
T-intersection with Creek Road (LR 15149)
Wyebrooke Vicinity (West Nantmeal Township)
Chester County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-163

HABS
PA,
15-WYBRO.V,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

ISABELLA FURNACE

HABS.

15-WYBRO. 1,

Location: Junction of County Road #15151 and County Road #15149,
West Nantmeal Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania
(Reference - Map of Chester County [by County
Commissioners] 1956).

Present Owner: Langoma Industries, Inc., Elverson, R.D., Pennsylvania.

Brief Statement
of Significance: This furnace, erected in 1835, was the last sizable
one to be built in Chester County. It ceased operation
in 1894, being the last active iron furnace in the
County.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Robert Wilson 1835 to
Henry Potts & John P. Rutter. By a no. of sales Robert S.
Potts got 5/18 and Joseph Potts 5/18 and David Potts 8/18.
In 1855 the assignees of David Potts and Co. sold to John Irey
and James Butler and in 1860 Butler sold his share to John
Irey, who in 1864 sold to Smith Brothers, who in 1880 sold to
Joseph D. Potts. By his will it came to William M. Potts,
and by his will the exec. sold to Frank Bloise, who in 1945
sold to Langoma Industries, Inc.
2. Date of erection: 1835.
3. Architect, builder, suppliers etc.: Unknown.
4. Original plans, construction etc.: None known.
5. Notes on alterations and additions: The furnace was worked on
and improved until 1894 when it went out of blast, the last
one in the county. It had been continued for some years when
it was losing money.
6. Important old views and references:
Views: Copy of best old photo is included in this book -
Photographer unknown, December 2, 1892, Original in Chester
County Historical Society.
References: Clipping and manuscript files at the Chester County
Historical Society under heading: West Nantmeal Twp. Business
Houses -Isabella Furnace.

B. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: None known.

D. Supplemental Material

1. "American Republican", 4-10-1855:

"PUBLIC SALE OF VALUABLE REAL AND PERSONAL PROPERTY. -- By virtue of assignments made to the undersigned by David Potts and William A. Smith, there will be exposed to Sale at Isabella Forge, in West Nantmeal township, Chester county, on MONDAY, the 23rd day of April, 1855, the following valuable personal property, embracing a pair of superior carriage HORSES, 9 team HORSES, gears, wagons, dearborns, extensive assortment of farming utensils, Thrashing Machine, corn sheller, from 20 to 25 acres of Grain in the ground, several hundred cords of chopped wood, a large lot of Forge Tools; weigh scales, 13 tons of blooms, several tons of scrap iron, anthracite and charcoal pig iron, bar iron, fire brick, sperm oil, several hundred bushels of charcoal, wheel-wright stuff; wheat, corn and oats at the mill, and a large number of other articles such as are usually used in and about iron works.

"ALSO, on the same day we will offer for sale that extensive and well known FURNACE and FORGE property, known as Isabella Forge, and about 60 ACRES of land attached. The land is of the best quality, and is in high state of improvement. The Forge is unsurpassed by any work of the kind in this region, and is fitted up in the best manner and in complete order, and is capable of making 750 tons of bloom per year. There are five forge fires and two steam engines with a super-abundance of blast. The steam engines are nearly new and in good running order. The other improvements are seven Tenant Houses, a furnace and large coal house, stone smith shop, carpenter shop, stone stables, frame Barn, corn crib, smoke house ice house, &c. The Mansion HOUSE, is large, commodious and well built, having 2 parlors. 2 entries and kitchen on the first floor, five chambers on the second floor all papered, garret ceiled, cellar under the whole house ceiled and plastered, with a mortar floor. Attached are a summer kitchen and bath house, an excellent garden, large yard; a pump of excellent water at the door with a hydraulic ram which carries the water to the upper side of the garden, from whence it is conveyed to the bath house. This property is convenient to Furnaces and Rolling Mills, and in a section of country where an ample supply of wood for coaling is easily procured.

"ALSO, at the same time that valuable and highly improved farm, known as the Wilson Farm, containing 69 ACRES, bounded by lands of Joseph Jrego, Mary Mills and the Isabella Forge Tract. -- This land is also of excellent quality and in a high state of improvement, with a considerable portion well wooded. The improvements are a two story Stone HOUSE, and kitchen, stone Barn with stabling under log barn and corn crib, and a pump of good water in the yard. The fences are in good condition. This property contains an inexhaustible supply of the celebrated iron ore known as Green's ore.

"ALSO, a tract of land containing 17 ACRES, known as the Culmerry Tract and Yarnall field; bounded by lands of Joseph Atkins, E. P. Yarnall, Isabella Forge property and others. The improvements are a Log House and Barn, stone spring house. The land is of excellent quality, and in good condition.

"ALSO, That known as the Galaway tract containing 2 ACRES, situate in said township of West Nantmeal, bounded by lands of Edward Parker, John Lindeman, and others. The land is of excellent quality, the improvements are a LOG HOUSE, weather boarded, log stable and spring of excellent water.

"ALSO, a tract of land in said township, containing about 50 ACRES, bounded by lands of John Lewis, Isaac Trego and others. On this tract are a large number of very valuable white oak trees, which will be sold separately from the land.

"ALSO Tract known as the Milligan place containing 12 ACRES, situate in said township, bounded by a public road, lands of Rebecca Dunwoody, Wesly Emory and others. This is excellent land, the improvements are a STONE HOUSE and small frame stable, good spring of water.

"The sale of the foregoing property will commence at 1 o'clock, P.M., and continue from day to day till all is sold. The Isabella Forge property will be offered precisely at 2 o'clock, the first day of sale.

ALSO,

"We will expose to Public Sale, on MONDAY, the 14th day of May next, the following described tracts of woodland:

1. Tract known as the Happerset tract, containing 13 ACRES, situate in the township of Honeybrook, bounded by lands of Effinger Happerset, Wm. Robinson and others. This tract is covered with first rate Chestnut rail timber, and will be divided and sold in smaller lots.
2. Tract known as the Way tract, situate in the township of Honeybrook, bounded by lands of Henry Amole, John Bruner, John Good and others. This is covered with chestnut sprouts 12 years old, and will be divided and sold in small lots.
3. The Flank tract, containing 67 ACRES, situate in the township of Honeybrook, bounded by lands of John Bruner, Jacob Mast and others, covered with chestnut timber. This tract will be divided and sold in smaller lots.

4. Tract known as the Way tract, containing 100 ACRES, situate in the township of Honeybrook, bounded by lands of Samuel Jones, Samuel Hatfield and others, part of the tract is covered with sprouts, remainder with first rate chestnut timber ready to cut. This tract will be divided and sold in smaller lots.

5. Tract known as the Shaner tract, situate in the township of Honeybrook, containing about fifteen Acres, bounded by lands of Samuel Jones, Pater Dix and others. This tract is covered with good chestnut timber, and will be sold in smaller lots.

6. Tract known as the Jenkins tract, situate in the township of Carnarvon, Lancaster co., containing 139 ACRES, bounded by lands of George Garmon, Levi B. Smith and others, covered with chestnut sprouts, 2 to 3 years old.

7. Tract known as the McCahren Tract, situate in the township of West Caln, containing 79 ACRES, bounded by lands of Charles Brook, James Brown and others, covered with sprouts 10 years old, this tract will be divided and sold in smaller lots.

8. Tract known as the Beartown tract, situate in Carnarvon township, Lancaster Co., bounded by lands of Thomas Russel and others, containing 21 ACRES, on this tract there is a large body of Hematite iron ore, easily mined and within one fourth of a mile of the Horse Shoe turnpike.

"The Sale will commence at 10 o'clock, P.M., on the 14th, at the Plank Tract on the Welsh Mountain, near John Bruner's, and on the 15th on the Way Tract of 100 Acres, on the Barren Hill near the Limestone Quarries. The Sales will be held on the respective tracts. Conditions made known at sale.

Robert B. Potts,
Addison May,

April 10-ts

Assignees."

2. "Kennett News and Advertiser", 4-5-1957,

By Charles W. Heathcote.

"The development of the iron business in Chester County was made possible by the early pioneers such as Samuel Nutt (1717), William Branson, Mordecai Lincoln, the great-great grandfather of President Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Potts in 1765. However the Potts families were particularly responsible for building up most extensively the iron business in Chester County and Pennsylvania.

"Since the Potts owned much land in northern Chester County they decided to build a new furnace since the iron business had expanded. A site was selected in West Nantmeal Township near Wyebrook and the

furnace was constructed on Perkins Run near the point where the creek flows into the Brandywine. It should be noted this was the last furnace of any size which was built in northern Chester County and where the last blast occurred in 1894. Modernization had taken place in the iron industry that plans were already rapidly developing in large and expanded production not only in Chester County but throughout the state.

"On April 1, 1835 Henry Potts and John P. Rutter secured by deed from Robert Wilson and wife 49 acres and 30 perches of land on the East branch of Brandywine Creek, which included a sawmill and fulling mill and the important right of backing up water as far as Mathew Robinson's patent and extended to the northeast corner of Esther Filson's land. The furnace was finished by the end of the year. It was named the Isabella furnace in honor of the wife of Henry Potts. He had married Isabella Ritner, the daughter of Daniel Ritner of Marble Hall, Montgomery County, who was engaged in farming and financial activities and one of the leading citizens of the county. In a short time David Potts, a younger brother of Henry became a member of the firm as he had much experience in the iron business.

"For many years David Potts operated the Springton forge which was located about four miles south of Isabella Furnace. He is usually known as Springton David, to designate him from several Potts who also bore the name David. Before Springton David became identified with Isabella Furnace he had sold his forge. In 1836 David Potts became the manager and opened the furnace for business. The interests of the furnace were divided as follows: Henry Potts, one half; David Potts, one-fourth and John Potts Rutter, one-fourth. In 1839 Robert S. Potts and 1840 Joseph Potts also brothers of Henry Potts became members of the firm. Later David Potts secured ownership of Isabella Furnace, however, he permitted William A. Smith to hold a small share.

"David Potts was born August 11, 1799. He became proficient in the iron business under the direction of his father, Joseph Potts, who operated the Glasgow forge. Later he opened the forge at Springton where he produced a high grade quality of iron. When he sold the Springton forge, he moved to Pottstown in 1835. Under his direction the business of Isabella Furnace increased and prospered. The iron ores were secured from the mines of St. Mary's and St. Peter's, Chester County and high grade iron was produced from these ores.

"However in the middle eighteen-fifties financial difficulties appeared in the United States which likewise affected the iron market. The failure of many banks throughout the nation brought about disastrous results for the business. In 1855 David Potts and William Smith assigned the property to Robert Potts and Addison May. The following year Isabella Furnace and 64 acres of land were sold to John Irey and James Butler who lived near the furnace. In 1860 John Irey purchased

Butler's share. Ireys lacked the unusual knowledge of the iron business and though the furnace operated partially successfully during the Civil War period, 1861-1865, nevertheless Ireys sold it in 1864 to Bentley H. William D, and Horace V. Smith, of Joanna Furnace.

....."After several months of negotiation the Smith brothers, owners of the furnace, finally yielded to the earnest request of Col. Joseph D. Potts, son of David Potts. Isabella Furnace and surrounding lands were the area which Col. Potts recognized as home. In the last analysis the Smith brothers were willing to sell since the cost of modernizing the furnace according to the standards of the time would be very expensive. Col. Potts secured possession of Isabella furnace in 1830.

"The first important improvement which Col. Potts made to the furnace was the equipment of steam power which increased its productive capacity. Prior to this improvement the production work depended upon water power secured from Perkins run. However seasons of drought diminished the water supply and frequently the furnace was closed down. When the water supply was sufficient the rate of production varied from 20 to 30 tons of iron per week, with the steam power added and other necessary improvement, the furnace produced 16 tons or more each day and averaged about 500 tons per month. The iron was likewise of fine quality. A railroad siding was also constructed from the Downingtown branch of the Pennsylvania railroad to the furnace which facilitated the work of the furnace in many ways. Col. Potts carried on the furnace business successfully and the last blast was made in 1894.

"In the meantime much improvement was made in many furnaces throughout the state in the utilization of anthracite coal which crippled production of such furnaces as the Isabella. However Col. Potts had accomplished his purpose in the proposal to round out his busy life as an iron-master. Before he closed the furnace he started to build a stately house on a hill on his land. Eventually the house was built but unfortunately Colonel Joseph D. Potts died before the house was finished. However the house was completed according to the original plans. Then his family occupied the house. The widow of Joseph D. Potts lived there until her death. Then William M. Potts made the mansion his home and when he died a few years ago this line of the Potts family came to an end."

Prepared by Bart Anderson - May 1959
Curator, Chester County Historical Society

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural Character: Efforts were constantly being made improve the production of the furnace from the time it was built until it closed.

2. Condition of Fabric: Fair.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Foundations: Stone.

2. Wall construction: Stone and brick.

3. Openings

Doorways and doors: None.

Windows and shutters: None.

C. Technical Description of Interiors: No information secured.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The furnace faces south, and its wild setting in an over-grown field is quite striking.

2. Enclosures: None.

3. Outbuildings: There are remains of several.

4. Walks, driveways etc.: None.

5. Landscaping, gardens etc.: None.

Prepared by Bart Anderson - May 1959
Curator, Chester County Historical Society